

Scottish Ensemble add chorus of approval to *We are in Time*



David Kettle

You can't fault the Scottish Ensemble's ambition, nor their appetite for collaboration. In the recent past they've played Arvo Pärt with theatre company Vanishing Point, and danced to Bach and Beethoven with Stockholm-based movement company Andersson Dance – alongside more traditional concerts, of course.

But this month brings what's surely their most ambitious collaborative project yet – and fittingly, one of the highpoints in the Ensemble's 50th anniversary season. *We are in Time* is a brand new production, a four-way collaboration between the Scottish Ensemble, director Stewart Laing, writer Pamela Carter and Icelandic composer Valgeir Sigurðsson. Its theme is a heart transplant, and it follows the stories of the donor and recipient, as well as the complex medical procedures and technology involved in making it happen.

"I started thinking about it as an opera," says Sigurðsson. And indeed, it's hard to define exactly what the show is going to be, since it quite fundamentally melds music, theatre and text. Even the Scottish Ensemble musicians get in on the boundary-blurring as instrumentalists, actors and singers, alongside singers Ruby Philogene and Jodie Landau, and actor Alison O'Donnell.

"I think Pamela was thinking along similar operatic lines," continues Sigurðsson, "so she provided me with what's basically an opera libretto. And it's as an opera should be, I guess – a coming together of all the crafts and arts."

Also coming together in the work, Sigurðsson explains, are lofty themes of technological and scientific achievements, and the human drama of life and death. "I was always interested in that dual aspect," he continues, "to mix this sort of very techno-heavy style with a deeply human side as well."

That collision between the technological and the human comes as second nature to Sigurðsson, whose expansive, atmospheric



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music often sets evocative melodies against raw, rugged electronic backdrops. He's a producer and multi-instrumentalist as well as a composer, and has scored films and theatre, as well as working with musicians including Björk, Sigur Rós, Brian Eno, Nico Muhly and plenty more. "I use a lot of technology in my music, and a lot of textures and electronics. But I like the overlap between this ancient form of playing instrumental music, singing and breathing, and modern computer processing, manipulating data to create something new."

For director Stewart Laing, working

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across genres – theatre, music, visuals and more – with multitasking performers is also something he feels familiar with, from his many, eclectic creations with Untitled Projects and further afield. "I've worked with filmmakers, visual artists, opera singers, songwriters and choreographers as collaborators. Once the group is together, it's a matter of blending the skills in the room to create work that's coherent, and hopefully original and surprising for an audience."

How did the idea arise of asking the Scottish Ensemble musicians to sing as well as play? "We originally

planned a cast of two singers working with the string players of the Scottish Ensemble," Laing continues. "The idea of asking the Ensemble to sing came very early on. I was aware of the collaborations they'd commissioned across artforms, and they were clearly interested in expanding their skills as performers, and making some brave choices as to how they would do that."

"It's been one of the gifts of the project," Sigurðsson agrees, "that the Scottish Ensemble have themselves decided, yes, we want to be the choir. But it's been challenging, too, to figure out choreography between playing and singing, sometimes at the same time, and sometimes acting too. How many hands or mouths or bodies do I have at each moment?"

Nevertheless, for Sigurðsson, harnessing the talents of his performers is key to the new work's success. "I'm there for a month before the opening, working with the ensemble and the singers. It's not just a case of giving them a score and expecting to hear it exactly like that on stage. It's part of my process to develop it and work with them on it. By the time of performance, we should have something that we feel we've co-created, that they've contributed their voices to." Quite literally, in this case. ■

We are in Time is at the Perth Theatre, 25-26 February, Tramway Glasgow, 28-29 February, Traverse Theatre Edinburgh, 3-4 March and Eden Court Inverness, 6 March